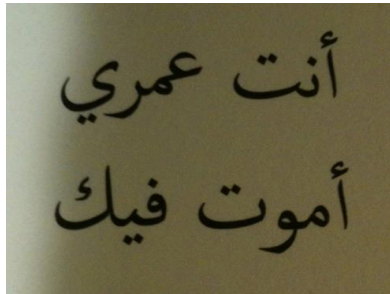


David Penchansky, *Understanding Wisdom Literature: Conflict and Dissonance in the Hebrew Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

Penchasky's slim volume is a tremendous boon to anyone interested in the 'conflict and dissonance' found in the wisdom literature. And it seems, at least to this reviewer, that his focus and true interest in the book is an exploration of exactly that. In other words, the subtitle is more important than the title. He shows, I think, that the proper way to appreciate the wisdom texts is to do it through the lens of dissonance. This is, it's needless to say, a relatively unique approach.

P. opens the volume with a bit of a curiosity. In place of the usual dedication (in the language of the volume) P. offers two lines of Arabic verse, to his wife:



Having no skills in the language of the Arabic speaking people of the world, I made inquiry and Jacob Wright of Emory University offered the following translation:

You're My Life
I'm Dying Into You

Our suspicion is that this is a quotation from the Arab Poet Rumi.¹ Whether that is in fact the case or not, it is intriguing that P. would choose Arabic as the language of his dedication in a book intended for an audience of English speakers. To be sure, the sentiment is beautiful; but how many of those who pick up the book will be able to appreciate it? And if they aren't intended to, why offer it? Is P. hinting here at things to come? Is he implying that the pages to follow will be grasped only by those 'on the inside'? Or is he simply playing the mischievous rascal, proffering something which he knows most people won't grasp (much in the way that wisdom sometimes disguises itself so that it only becomes clear to the wise)?

Whatever the reason, and however P. were to answer the question, the reader is already set to anticipate learned discourse and that's precisely what he or she will find.

In 113 pages the author introduces readers to the following topics: 1) Who are the Sages? (pp. 11-21); 2) What Unity in Proverbs (pp. 22-34); 3) The Meaning of the Book of Job (pp. 35-49); 4) Wisdom, Madness, and Folly: The Three Qoheleths (pp. 50-63); 5) Sounds of Silence: The *Absence* of Covenantal Theology in the Wisdom Literature (pp. 64-85); 6) Sophia and Simon: The Two Poles of Ben Sira's Affection (pp. 86-95); and 7) The Conservatism of Pseudo-Solomon (pp. 96-110). An Introduction precedes the central materials and a Conclusion draws it all together.

In these chapters P. talks about authorship, dominant themes, and what I would call 'subversive' materials (i.e., those materials which aren't 'traditional' in their understanding of God, or Israel). These 'subversive' texts are discussed in chapters 5-7.

Each chapter concludes with a series of questions useful either for class work or group discussions and a

1 <http://www.dar-al-masnavi.org/about-arabic-poetry.html>

listing of 'key words' along with some 'suggested readings'.

P's work is an excellent, thought -provoking, intriguing, and most of the time extremely interesting overview of wisdom literature.

Given the book's size P. can't possibly, and doesn't intend to, cover everything. But what he does cover, what he does do, is fly above the landscape of wisdom lit and, gazing down like a satellite he takes 'photos' and gives readers something that other books which treat wisdom literature don't: 'the big picture'.

This volume is a tonic, a curative, to the flattening of wisdom literature which we find in too many volumes. Wisdom's many voices are allowed to speak freely. I recommend it, highly and without reservation.

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